

# **MASSACHUSETTS SMALL AND RURAL SCHOOLS TASK FORCE**

**THE EFFECTIVENESS, VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF  
SMALL DISTRICTS**

# DEFINITION OF SMALL SCHOOLS

- The vast majority of educational research supports the concept of small school effectiveness.
- It appears, however, that the determinants of school or district size are seldom results of research...More often, school size is the result of other factors-political, economic, social, demographic...(Williams, 1990)
- For the purpose of our study we have defined a small district as two thousand students or less. In Massachusetts this is 161 of the 331 Local Education Agencies, however, we focused on the 134 academic districts excluding the vocational schools.

## **DEFINITION OF SMALL SCHOOLS (Cont.)**

- It is also interesting to note that 75% of the school districts in the United States are small districts that have fewer than 2,500 students. (Yan, 2006)
- School characteristics that lead to improved teaching and learning such as more personalized attention, greater student affiliation, teacher collegiality, parent involvement, and ability to assess knowledge and differentiate curriculum are easier to implement in smaller districts.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

- The superiority of small schools and districts has been established with clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research. (Raywid, 1999)
- Cotton (1996) discovered in her research of reviewing 103 documents that many of the key indicators of school quality and student success are prevalent in small districts.

# MASSACHUSETTS SMALL DISTRICTS

- The graduation rate was 6.5% better.
- The dropout rate in the small districts was 2.5% lower.
- Attendance rate was 2.1% better.
- 3.7% more students enroll in colleges after graduation.

# MASSACHUSETTS SMALL DISTRICTS

- There are several researchers who promote the per-graduate cost as a more accurate indicator of financial comparison versus the per-pupil rate. If this were the determinant of fiscal economy, small districts would indeed be seen as more economical in the long run.

# OVERVIEW

## STUDENT SUCCESS

- Research on small school/districts is overwhelmingly supportive of their effectiveness.
- Small districts perform better on indicators of student success, such as graduation rate, dropout rate, post graduation plans and attendance, both nationally and in Massachusetts.

# **SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION**

- The most powerful rational for consolidation is economic efficiency followed by increased curricular offerings. However, neither of these rationales have any strong support in research. Several studies over the last 50 years (Hirsch, 1960; Valencia, 1984; Jewel, 1989; Kennedy, 1989; Strifel, 1998; Eyre, 2002; Yan, 2006; Gritter and Silvernail, 2007; Rural School and Community Trust, 2003) have shown that over time consolidation has not resulted in any significant savings and reductions in per pupil costs have been very little if at all. Several studies actually showed an increase in costs association with consolidation.



## **SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION (Cont.)**

Some findings from these studies indicate that:

- The only area where there was any statistically significant savings was in administrative costs in the first two years; however, these savings were often offset by increases in other costs related to larger and sometimes more impersonal schools (more guidance and discipline services, maintenance, security, and new levels of administration such as coordinators). Interestingly, the research suggests that early administrative savings tend to be very short-term only, as larger organizations have a strong tendency toward creating more extensive and costly administrative bureaucracy within a few years.

## **SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION (Cont.)**

- Larger districts can offer a wider variety of course offerings such as advanced placement courses; however, achievement levels in small schools are as good if not better than larger ones. Interestingly, there are a number of small districts who offer full advanced placement programs as well.
- Teacher salary scales can increase when districts are combined and thus negate any staff savings.
- There are instances when consolidation does work – usually when voluntarily and thoughtfully planned and initiated, and when the resulting size is not too large.

# **SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION (Cont.)**

- A fear of small schools in consolidation efforts is that once a larger district is formed the smaller communities lose their voice on school committees and risk school closings. This indeed seems to have been the case in Arkansas and West Virginia.
- Other states across the country are investigating and implementing legislatively mandated school consolidation plans. The research regarding the effectiveness of these legislatively forced plans is not encouraging. In our neighboring states of Vermont and Maine there is much citizen dissatisfaction with such plans. Maine, in particular, which just this year implemented such a plan is experiencing much citizen push-back through many bills filed to amend or repeal the law as well as a citizen petition drive.

## **SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION (Cont.)**

- In our analysis of Massachusetts School Districts we found using Adequate Yearly Progress Data (AYP) that:
- Statewide 20% of the state's districts are “in status” – that is not making sufficient progress in improving the performance of their students either as a whole or for certain subgroups. However, in our sample of small districts we discovered that only 6% are “in status.”

# FINANCIAL

- All school districts in Massachusetts are struggling with decreasing resources and a greater reliance upon the municipal revenues.
- The state portion of school funding dropped from 34% to 30% from 2002 to 2006.
- Fixed costs such as insurance and utilities as well as growing special education costs have forced school systems to cut in other areas of the budget.
- The foundation categories have not kept up with the realities of school funding in Massachusetts, and it does not seem likely that a great infusion of financial resources is going to be available in the near term.

# FINANCIAL (Cont.)

In our Small Study we learned that:

- In all but two districts the actual versus required spending is in excess of 100%, much like those of other districts.
- The average spending levels of these districts exceeds the state required level by 30% (of those districts filing a report).
- The mean per-pupil cost of the sample exceeded the state average by \$165.
- Stand alone districts spent less per-pupil than the regional academic districts in the sample. (\$1,400 per pupil less, on average).

# MOVEMENT TOWARD CONSOLIDATION

- In several studies over the last 50 years documented by the (Rural School and Community Trust, 2003) there has been no indication that consolidation has resulted in any significant savings over time.
- Hirsch's study in 1960 of 29 school districts near St. Louis concluded that "There were no consistent economies of scale, and the sharing academic programs would be a more cost-effective way than consolidations to deal with the fiscal problems of districts."
- Valencia in his 1984 review of 40 studies concluded that "closing schools reduces per-pupil costs very little, if at all." (Valencia, 1984)
- Jewel (1989) studying data from 50 states and Washington, D.C. found that per pupil costs and student enrollment were not statistically related, suggesting that there are not economies of scale.

## **MOVEMENT TOWARD CONSOLIDATION (Cont.)**

- In a study of 330 school districts in Arkansas (Kennedy, 1989) concluded that “there is no evidence to suggest that consolidation of small school districts into larger ones will necessarily reduce expenditures per student, increase standardized test scores, or reduce dropout rates.”
- In a series of articles by the Charleston Gazette (Eyre, 2002) on the cost of school closings in West Virginia, it was discovered that over a ten year period where the state had closed 325 schools to save money, they actually increased the number of central office administrators despite the system declining in student numbers by 41,000 and pupil transportation costs more than doubled.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STUDY

1. The Chapter 70 formula needs to be revisited. We support the efforts of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents and the Massachusetts Association of School Committees to create an updated foundation formula to adequately support school districts of all size.
2. Voluntary Inter-local compacts should be actively pursued as an alternative to consolidation. Such compacts can assist schools in collaborating on a variety of cost sharing methods.
3. The educational collaboratives should take a bigger role in designing and maintaining structures of collaboration and greater fiscal efficiencies for schools.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM STUDY (Cont.)

4. Technology should be better utilized to assist with collaboration. An electronic Web-based clearing house as a kind of virtual collaborative could be created with support from the state to assist districts in coordinating many cost sharing ideas such as distance learning, shared professional development, data collection and analysis.
5. Consolidation efforts should not be legislatively forced. The research is clear that many of those efforts in other states have not shown positive results. However, the state could take a bigger role in providing resources for voluntary collaboration between districts.

# CONCLUSIONS

- Small schools work! Our findings indicated the student performance in small Massachusetts school districts outperform larger districts. In times of increasing accountability and diminishing resources, educators and policy makers need to stay focused on what makes schools successful.
- Efficiency must be more broadly measured in addition to economic measures; other indicators must be used as metrics of efficiency. To begin, student performance data, teacher mobility, retention, and parental support should be included as indicators of success.
- There needs to be a movement from deficit to assets thinking: Rather than using deficit models (i.e., financial resources), to make legislative decisions, assets of successful school districts should be explored and replicated.

## **CONCLUSIONS (Cont.)**

- Building on the findings of this report, research should explore the specific programmatic, leadership, pedagogical, and structural elements that make small school districts in Massachusetts successful.
- A spirit of collaboration not competition between districts can result in better and more efficient delivery of services to students.